

Dialectics and Its Place in Indian Thought

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Dialectics in general means application of the specialised pattern, of logical analysis and criticism from both the material and formal aspects, to philosophical and other problems. Logic, according to Mill,¹ is a collection of precepts or rules for thinking, grounded on a Scientific investigation of the requisites of valid thought. Uberweg² defines logic as the doctrine of the regulative laws, on whose observance rests the realisation of the idea of truth in theoretical activity of man Aristotle³ uses 'dialectic' for that department of study which examines the presuppositions

lying at the back of all particular sciences. Thus dialectics based essentially on logic, covers all fields of human knowledge as it investigates the correctness of knowledge itself.

The art and science of dialectics has had a long history both in the West and in the East. In the West, Zeno of Elia 'Invented' Dialectics, the art of disputation by question and answer. Plato developed it metaphysically in connection with his doctrine of 'Ideas' as the art of analysing ideas in themselves and in relation to the ultimate idea of the good. The special function of the

1. Examination of Sir W. Hamilton's Philosophy, 1865, p. 462.
2. System der Logik. Translated into English by T.M. Lindsay, 1871, 3.
3. Encyclopaedia Britannica, (14th Edition) Vol. VII, p. 314.

so-called 'Socratic dialectic' was to show the inadequacy of popular beliefs.....The Aristotelian dialectics however, deals with the universal laws of reasoning, which can be applied to the particular arguments".⁴ Later on, the stoics utilised this weapon of dialectics with force. The twelfth and thirteenth centuries saw the rise of the scholastics who had great faith in dialectics and also in syllogistic reasoning. The overemphasis laid by them on dialectics led to their being indifferent to facts and science and believing in reasoning in matters which only observation could decide and also in giving an undue importance to verbal distinctions and subtleties. This must have been the reason for the term dialectics acquiring a contemptuous sense as 'verbal or purely abstract disputation devoid of practical value'.⁵

In India, the term dialectics is denoted by such terms as Ānvīkṣikī, Hetuśāstra, Hetuvidyā, Nyāya and Vādaśāstra. Originally Ānvīkṣikī was the name for 'investigation' or 'search' for the soul and thus it was called by the name Ātmavidyā.⁶ At a later stage, Ānvīkṣikī came to be differentiated from Ātmavidyā.⁷ The word 'Ānvīkṣikī' was taken in its etymological meaning of 'logic' or 'enquiry' from Ānvīkṣā, a compound from the prefix Anu 'according to' and Ikṣā 'looking', i.e. a science laying down the rules according to which the search should be carried out. Ānvīkṣikī and Ātmavidyā differed in this that the latter dealt with dogmatic assertions about the nature of the soul, the former contained reasons supporting those assertions. Both these were aspects of the same philosophical discipline because

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. (a) Traividyebhyastrayīm vidyām daṇḍanītiśca śāśvatīm
Ānvīkṣikīm cātmavidyām vārtārambhāśca lokataḥ

— Manusmṛti 7-43.

(b) Trayī vārtā daṇḍanītiścetī mānavāḥ
Trayīviśeṣo hyānvīkṣikīti

— Kauṭilya, Arthaśāstra, I-II.

7. Ānvīkṣikī trayī vārtā daṇḍanītiścetī vidyāḥ — Ibid.

both are inter-related. There must be some definite assertions about the soul and the assertions must be backed by logical reasoning. Mere assertions without logical sanction would be like constructions on sand which would collapse at the slightest touch of criticism. So in the Upaniṣadic period when it became a regular investigation into the nature of soul, it is seen that both these aspects were fused into one.⁸

Later On, Ānvikṣiki was bifurcated into Darśana and Ānvikṣiki proper. The former dealt with the metaphysical thoughts about Ātman or Soul, thereby helping 'seeing' and attaining the Supreme

Soul while the latter dealt with the body of reasons and developed into a system of logical analysis of ideas.⁹ The Ānvikṣiki as a theory of reasoning was called Hetuśāstra or Hetuvidyā as is evident from the Manusmṛti.¹⁰ It was also called Tarkavidyā, the art of debate, or Vāda vidyā, the art of discussion in as much as it dealt with rules for carrying on disputations in learned assemblies called Samiti or Paṇṣad, which are mentioned in the Upaniṣads.¹¹

Still later, Ānvikṣiki developed into an independent science called by the name, Nyāyaśāstra. The word Nyāya, etymologically means the same thing as the word

8. Ātmā vā are dṛṣṭavyaḥ śrotavyo mantavyo nididhyāsitavyaḥ
Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, II. iv. 5.

9. Imāstu catasro vidyāḥ pṛthak-prasthānāḥ prāṇabhṛtāmanugra-
hāyopadiśyante yāṁ caturthīyamānvikṣikīātmavidyā.
Tasyaḥ pṛthak-prasthānāḥ saṁśayaḍayaḥ padārthāḥ
Teṣaṁ pṛthagvacanamantareṇādhyātmavidyāmātramīyam syāt
yothopanīśadaḥ.

Vātsyāyana, Nyāyabhyāṣya, I. I. 1.

10. Yo'vamanyeta te mūle hetuśāstrāśrayāddvijah
Sa sādhubhīrbahiṣkāryo nāstiko vedanīndakah
Manusmṛti, II. 11.

11. Śvetaketurba Āruṇeyaḥ Pañcālānām samitīmeyāya
Chāndogya Upaniṣad. V. III. I.

Śvetaketurba vā Āruṇeyaḥ Pañcālānām paṇṣadamājagāma.
Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, VI. II. 1.

Ānvikṣiki. It means 'going into a subject', i.e., an analytical investigation of the subject through the process of logical reason. Vātsyāyana, the classical commentator on the Nyāyasūtras defines it as 'a critical examination of the objects of knowledge by means of the canons of logical reason' and contends that it works only with regard to things that are doubtful.¹² This system of philosophy called Nyāya, formulated by Medhātithi Gotam¹³ goes into all subjects, physical or metaphysical according to the syllogistic method; it is the science of logical proof, and furnishes a correct method of philosophical inquiry into several departments of human knowledge. We can observe here that when the word Ānvikṣiki came to have Nyāya as its equivalent, its meaning expanded.

Originally the word signified 'logical inquiry into the subject of soul', while in its expanded sense it connotes 'logical inquiry in general, into the nature of soul as well as into the nature of external reality comprising the objects of knowledge'. And Nyāya as a system of philosophy laid down the canons of reasoning and of avoiding fallacies in reasoning, thus enabling the possibility of a fruitful discussion and ascertainment of truth.

A study of Indian philosophy reveals that dialectics or logical 'cross-examination' has played a very important role in the evolution and development of all the systems of Indian philosophy. Dialectics has been used essentially as a weapon to refute the views of the opponent and to defend and establish one's own

12. Tatra nānupalabdhe na nirṇīte'rthe nyāyah pravartate kimtarhi samśayite'rthe
Nyāyābhāṣya, I. 1. 1.

13. "We thus find that Medhātithi, Gotama, Gautama and Medhātithi Gautama were the names for one and the same person, who founded the Ānvikṣiki par excellence. His work on Ānvikṣiki has not come down to us in its original form.....His theory of reasoning has reached us in a crude form through the Caraka-samhitā and in a developed form through the Nyāyasūtra"....Dr. S. C. Vidyabhushan, A History of Indian Logic, Calcutta, 1921, p. 20.

views.¹⁴ This is evidenced in the writings of all Sāstrakāras, orthodox as well as heterodox when they follow the method of Tārvapākṣa and Siddhānta in their expositions. As such whenever any system of philosophy wanted to establish its doctrines as well-founded against other notions opposed to it, it had to make use of this weapon of dialectics. The utility of dialectics in India was very considerable in as much as the Indian soil was congenial to the birth of many systems which were poles apart in their metaphysical doctrines. And as dialectics covers all the fields of human knowledge, every branch of knowledge felt the need of dialectics to give a systematic and scientific form to the exposition of its doctrines.

However, the Indian spirit did not give an exaggerated importance to mere reasoning. It knew the limitations of human reason

and therefore made the Vedā authority the ultimate source of Dharma and Tattva. The value and utility of logic was also freely admitted only in the exposition and interpretation of Dharma and Tattva. The Upaniṣads repeatedly contend that the Highest Principle should be 'heard' (clearly, from the Vedas), should be 'logically ascertained' and then it should be 'concentrated upon'.¹⁵ This shows that logic the precursor of dialectics was given the second place in trying to know the Ultimate Reality.

All branches of knowledge in India whether religious, secular or philosophical followed the same principle as regards logical reasoning. Thus the Gautama Dharma Sūtra (Adhyāya XI) prescribes a course of training for the king, and acknowledges the utility of Tarka in the administration of justice but further entrusts the final authority to the hands of those well-versed in the Vedas.¹⁶

14. Asadvādlprayuktānām vākhyānām pratiśeṣaṇam
Svavākyasiddhirapi ca kriyate tantra-yuktau
Sūtrasambhitā, LXV.

15. See footnote (8) above.

16. Rājā sarvasyeṣṭe bhāhmanavarjam sādhu-karī syātsādhuvādī,
trayyāmāvīkṣikyām cābhivilītaḥ. Nyāyādhiḡgame tarko'-
bhyupeyaḥ. Tenābhyūhya yaḥ hāsthānam gamayet. Vipratī-
pattau traividyavṛddhebhyaḥ pratyavahṛtya niṣṭhām gamayet.
Sūtras 1, 2, 3, 25, 26 and 27.

Manu, while acknowledging the importance of logic, contends that it should not go against the basic truths of the Vedas¹⁷. The Yājñavalkyasmṛiti attributed to the Philosopher counts Nyāya or science of reasoning among the fourteen principle science,¹⁸ while Vyāsa known in tradition as the compiler of Vedas and other allied branches of knowledge, admits that he was able to arrange and classify the Upaniṣads with the help of Ānvīkṣikī or the science of logical reasoning.¹⁹ The Mahābhārata²⁰ and the Purāṇas²¹

also mention the science of reasoning among important sciences.

But it was at the hands of Kauṭilya that Ānvīkṣikī got the highest praise. He says that this science has put the world under obligation (Lokasya upakaroti). In his opinion logical reasoning serves a greater purpose as it furnishes people with reasons for estimating strength or weakness of the branches of knowledge, keeps intellect unperturbed both in prosperity and adversity and infuses subtlety and power into

17. Ārṣam dharmopadeśam ca vedāśāstrāvirodhinā
Yastarkenānusandhatte sa dharmam veda netarah XII 106.
18. Purāṇanyāyamīmāṃsā dharmāśāstrāṅgamīśritāḥ
Vedāḥ sthānāni vidyānām dharmasya ca caturdaśa I. 3.
19. Tatropaniṣadam tāta pariśeṣam tu pārthiva
Matbāmi manasā tāta dr̥ṣṭvā cānvīkṣikim parām.
Mahābhārata, quoted by Viśvanātha in Nyāyavṛtti. I. 1. 1.
20. Nyāyāśikṣā cikitsā ca dānam pāśupatam tathā
Hetunaiva samam janma divyamānuṣasañjñitam
Ādiparva, I. 6. 7.
21. (a) Aṅgāni caturo vedān purāṇanyāyavistarān
Mīmāṃsām dharmāśāstram ca parigryātha sāmpratam
Matsyarūpeṇa ca punaḥ kalpācāvudakantare. 'Padma-
purāṇa, Muir's Original Sanskrit Texts, Vol. III, P. 27.
- (b) Anantaram ca vāktrebhyo vedāstasya vinitṛtāḥ
Mīmāṃsā nyāyavidyā ca pramāṇāṣṭākasaṃyutā
Matsyapurāṇa, III, 2.

intelligence, speech and action 22
He concludes with a high tribute:
"It is the lamp of all sciences, the
resource of all actions, and the per-
manent shelter of all virtues". 23
This passage has been quoted with
approval by Vatsyāyana in his
Nyāyabhāṣya (I. 1. 1).

In the philosophical literature,
after the Upaniṣads the Vedānta-
sūtras or Brahma-sūtras accord a
high place to logical reasoning in
establishing the value of many
metaphysical doctrines. The evo-
lution of the principles of inter-
pretation called 'Tātparyā-līṅga'
in the Vedānta-Sāstra is itself a
triumph of logic and textual cri-
ticism. The various adhikaraṇa-
nyāyas embodied in the Brahma-
Sūtras show clearly that the Sūtras
discuss the various philosophical
topics dialectically. The Pūva
mīmāṃsā and other philosophical
works also show the place of
dialectics in setting metaphysical
problems

Both the Valdika and Avaldika
schools made free use of logic in
dialectical discussions. But in
some schools of thought such as
the Nyāya-Valśika and the
Buddhism, its importance came
to be exaggerated. This led to
unhealthy results of overstrained
formalism (as was the case with
the scholastic schools in the West).
Logic and dialectics were only
means to an end and not end
in themselves. When this was
forgotten a note of warning had
to be administered as to the limi-
tations of formal logical reason-
ing. Indian spirit accepted only
that logic which was in confor-
mity with the basic truths stated
in the Vedas as revelations. As
against this, the Jainas with their
Syādvāda, the Buddhist dialecti-
cians with their negative dialectics,
and the Cārvākas using infer-
ence against their opponents as
a purely destructive weapon, all
tended to undermine the early

22. Dharmādharmau trayyām. Arthānarthau vārtāyām. Nayā-
nayau daṇḍanīyām. Balābale caitāsam hetubhīranvikṣa-
mānā lokasyopakaroti vyasane'bhyudaye ca buddhimavasthā-
payati prajñāvākyavaśīradyam ca karoti.

Arthaśāstra, I. ii.

23. Pradīpaḥ sarvavidyānamuyāyaḥ sarvakarmaṇām
Āśrayaḥ sarvadharmāṇām ś.śvadānvikṣikī matā

Ibid.

Vedic tradition. Even classical Sāṅkhya showed the same tendency of giving undue importance to logic. The Upaniṣadic thinkers and their followers often protested against this undue importance attached to logic. The Upaniṣads disapproved of the excessive reliance on logic, when they declared that the Brahma-knowledge could neither be got from 'mere logic' nor discredited by it,²⁴ while the Brahma-sūtras condemn formal logic as having no finality.²⁵ Manu lays down

that an atheist condemning the Vedas on the basis of logic should be ex-communicated.²⁶ The first poet Vālmiki discredits those persons of perverse intellect who indulge in the frivolities of logic.²⁷ Vyāsa in the Mahābhārata relates a doleful story of a repenting brāhmin who was born among jackals because of his evil.²⁸ The Skandapurāṇa clearly points out that logic depending too much on itself is unhealthy, while when it depends upon the

24. Naśī tarkaṇa matirāpaneyā proktā'nyenaiva sujñānāya preṣṭha. Kāṭha Upaniṣad, I. ii. 9.

25. II. i. 11. Śāṅkara remarks—Itasā nāgamsgamye'rthe kevalena tarkaṇa pratyavasthātavyam. Yasmānnirāgamāḥ puruṣotppekṣāmā'traṇibandhanāstarkā apratiṣṭhītā bhavanti. Brahma-sūtra Śāṅkarabhāṣya, II. i. 11.

26. See foot note 10 above.

27. Dharmasāstreṣu mukhyeṣu vidyamāneṣu durbudhāḥ Buddhimānvīkṣikīm prāpya nirartham pravadanti te Rāmāyaṇa, II. 100. 39.

28. Ahamāsam paṇḍitako haltuko vedanīndakāḥ
Ānvīkṣikīm tarkavidyāmanurakto nirarthakām
Hetuvādān pravādītā vakā samsatsu hetumat
Ākroṣṭā cābhivaktā ca brahmanvākyeṣu ca dvijān
Nāstikāḥ sarvaśāṅkī ca mūrkha paṇḍitamanikāḥ
Tasyeyam phalanirvṛtiḥ śrīgālatvam mama dvija
śāntiparvāḥ. CX, 47-49.

Vedas it serves many a purpose.²⁹ It is because, the function of logic is only to test truth by formal and material criticism and not to discover truth independently that the Vedic tradition gave a subordinate position to logic as such. Logic can only play a complimentary role to Vedic authority in as much as it clears doubts and helps to arrive at a correct understanding and interpretation of the basic truths promulgated in the Vedas.³⁰ This role of logic and dialectics was well recognised by the different schools of Vedānta and they developed, as their works show, their theories accordingly and explained the metaphysical doctrines according to logic and reasoning based on the Vedic tradition.

It is clear from the foregoing that unlike the West, India developed in the course of centuries a cautious attitude towards logic and dialectics. Indian thinkers were primarily concerned not only with problems of Ultimate Reality, but also with the means leading to self-realisation. The use of logic as a powerful guide in worldly endeavours was never undervalued; but, at the same time, its limitations in vouchsafing the highest goal were fully realised. A clear grasp of the universal admission of logic's claim for reaching truth shows a scientific spirit. Since Indians did not pursue science as an end in itself, the scope of logic and dialectics had to be, perforce, narrowed down to the demands of religion and spiritual truths.

29. Gotamaḥ svena tarkeṇa khaṇḍayan tatra tatra hi
śapto'tha munibhīstata śārgālīm yonimṛcchati
Punaścānugrhitōsau śrutisiddhāntatarkataḥ
Sarvam lokopakārāya tava śāstram bhaviṣyati
Kālikā-khaṇḍa, XVII.

30. Śrutyaṛtha-vipratipattau cārthābhāsanirākaraṇeṇa samyagar-
thanirdhāraṇam tarkeṇaive.
vākyavṛttinirōpanarōpeṇa kriyate
Śaṅkara, Brahmasūtra bhāṣya, II. 1. 11.